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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 5599
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 8373
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 4296
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0417
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 2187
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 4844
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000544

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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: DISCUSSIONS WITH BANGKOK'S
MUSLIM ELITE

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Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle: 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Recent meetings in Bangkok with Muslim scholars about Prime Minister Samak's policies towards the violence in southern Thailand shed little light on how the new government might approach the problem. The Central Islamic Committee appears to have little desire to engage seriously on the issue, and a prominent Muslim academic actively engaged in seeking a resolution to the insurgency believes that resolving the issue is not important to Thailand's senior political leadership. Although Prime Minister Samak's statement of policy priorities, submitted to the National Assembly on February 18, lists resolution of the unrest in the deep south as an "urgent" policy, the Muslim elite in Bangkok do not appear overly enthusiastic about the prospects for new policy initiatives. End Summary.

12. (C) In light of recent statements by newly installed Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej and Interior Minister Chalerm Yubamrung regarding plans to resolve the violence in Thailand's extreme south, Poloff met with two prominent Muslim leaders in an effort to understand the new government's policy direction. (Note: According to press reports on February 6, Prime Minister Samak endorsed a proposal by Banjong Somanee, Vice President of the Central Islamic Committee, to disarm civilians, and junior military and police officers in the deep south as a way of ending the violence. Samak has since backed away from his endorsement. Separately, on February 12, Minister of Interior Chalerm announced that he would hold public hearings in the three southern border provinces of Narathiwat, Yala, and Pattani, to determine whether a special administrative zone should be established in the South as a way to end the violence. Chalerm withdrew the idea after criticism from the Prime Minister. End note.)

The Central Islamic Committee

13. (SBU) On February 8, Poloff met with Banjong Somanee, Vice President of The Central Islamic Committee, to seek background about his proposal to Prime Minister Samak that all civilians in Thailand's southern three provinces be disarmed.

When asked about press reports regarding Samak's initial endorsement of his controversial plan, Banjong bristled that the reports about his proposal had been incorrect. Banjong said disarming the population was only part of the solution. According to Banjong, the entire proposal is to make the region "vice-free" as well weapons free. This means banning alcohol, gambling, and prostitution. Only after the south is weapons and vice-free can issues like development and education be addressed. The plan calls for the government to work through local village and district leaders to collect the weapons over a three-month period, after which anyone found with a weapon would face execution. Banjong said he disagreed with Samak's contention that execution was too harsh, and that transgressors should be sent to prison for life instead. After the three-month period, junior military and police officers would be disarmed as well. When questioned about the practicality of this plan, Banjong snapped that implementation was not his problem. He said he has no alternative solutions because it is the government's job to solve the violence, not the Central Islamic Committee.

Security, Not Politics

14. (C) Looking for a better indication of where Prime Minister Samak is heading with his South policy, Poloff met with Chaiwat Satha-Anand, Director of the Peace Information Center, Foundation for Democracy and Development Studies, at Thammasat University. Chaiwat believes Samak sees success in resolving the violence in the South as unlikely. Characterizing Samak as being very conservative, Chaiwat thinks Samak will approach the problem from the traditional

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perspective of the Bangkok power elite, i.e., that it is not a political issue. The power elite in Bangkok tend to see the problem as a Muslim issue and a rebellion -- which is about security, not politics. To highlight his point, Chaiwat pointed to the press conference Samak held after his meeting with members of the Central Islamic Committee. When asked about the issue of justice in the South, Samak replied, "We have had enough talking about justice." Chaiwat believes this is a bad sign.

15. (C) Ultimately, Chaiwat said, the problem is unimportant to Samak. Chaiwat thinks Samak will either leave the problem in the hands of bureaucrats he trusts or manipulate the situation to his advantage. According to Chaiwat, Samak is not beyond taking advantage of nationalist sentiment and characterizing the situation as the residents of the three southern provinces rebelling against the Thai state. Catering to the popular vote, he will work to suppress the violence. Whatever the outcome of the situation, he will turn it into a symbol of government action against forces that want to harm the country.

16. (C) Comment: Our interlocutors in the Muslim community do not appear to have much faith the Samak government will move forward in resolving the issue of southern violence. Although we believe it is too soon to assess the importance the government will place on the issue, its prominent position on the policy statement Samak submitted to the National Assembly make it appear as though the issue will not be ignored. We will continue to counsel the new government to show restraint and address the underlying causes of the southern unrest.

JOHN